Scottish Short Stories 2

The Drowned Rose

By George Mackay Brown

There was a sudden fragrance, freshness, coldness in the room. I looked up from my book. A young woman in a red dress had come in, breathless, eager, ready for laughter. The summer twilight of the far north was just beginning; it was late in the evening, after ten o’clock. The girl peered at me where I sat in the shadowy window-seat. ‘You’re not Johnny,’ she said, more than a bit disappointed.

‘No,’ I said, ‘that isn’t my name.’

She was certainly a very beautiful girl, with her abundant black hair and hazel eyes and small sweet sensuous mouth. Who was she - the merchant’s daughter from across the road, perhaps? A girl from one of the farms? She was a bit too old to be one of my future pupils.

‘Has he been here?’ she cried. ‘Has he been and gone again? The villain. He promised to wait for me. We’re going up the hill to watch the sunset.’ Again the flash of laughter in her eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I’m a stranger. I only arrived this afternoon. But I assure you nobody has called here this evening.’

‘Well now, and just who are you?’ she said. ‘And what are you doing here?’

‘My name is William Reynolds, I said. ‘I’m the new schoolmaster.’

She gave me a look of the most utter sweet astonishment. ‘The new – !’ she shook her head. ‘I’m most terribly confused,’ she said. ‘I really am. The queerest things are happening.’

‘Sit down and tell me about it,’ I said. For I liked the girl immensely. Blast that Johnny whoever-he-is, I thought; some fellows have all the luck. Here, I knew at once, was one of the few young women it was a joy to be with. I wished she would stay for supper. My mouth began to frame the invitation.

‘He’ll have gone to the hill without me,’ she said. ‘I’ll wring his neck. The sun’ll be down in ten minutes. I’d better hurry.’

She was gone as suddenly as she had come. The fragrance went with her. I discovered, a bit to my surprise, that I was shivering, even though it was a mild night and there was a decent fire burning in the grate.

‘Goodnight,’ I called after her.

No answer came back.

Blast that Johnny. I wouldn’t mind stumbling to the top of a hill, breathless, with a rare creature like her, on such a beautiful night, I thought. I returned regretfully to my book. It was still light enough to read when I got to the end of the chapter. I looked out of the window at the
russet-and-primrose sky. Two figures were silhouetted against the sunset on a rising crest of the hill. They stood there hand in hand. I was filled with happiness and envy.

I went to bed before midnight, in order to be fresh for my first morning in the new school.

I had grown utterly sick and tired of teaching mathematics in the junior secondary school in the city; trying to insert logarithms and trigonometry into the heads of louts whose only wish, like mine, was to be rid of the institution for ever. I read an advertisement in the educational journal for a male teacher – ‘required urgently’ – for a one-teacher island school in the north. There was only a month of the summer term to go. I sent in my application at once, and was appointed without even having to endure an interview. Two days later I was in an aeroplane flying over the snow-scarred highlands of Scotland. The mountains gave way to moors and firths. Then I looked down at the sea stretching away to a huge horizon; a dark swirling tide-race; an island neatly ruled into tilth and pasture. Other islands tilted towards us. The plane settled lightly on a runway set in a dark moor. An hour later I boarded another smaller plane, and after ten merry minutes flying level with kittiwakes and cormorants I was shaking hands with the island representative of the education committee. This was the local minister. I like the Reverend Donald Barr at once. He was, like myself, a young bachelor, but he gave me a passable tea of ham-and-eggs at the manse before driving me to the school. We talked easily and well together all the time. ‘They’re like every other community in the world,’ he said, ‘the islanders of Quoylay. They’re good and bad middling – mostly middling. There’s not one really evil person in the whole island. If there’s a saint I haven’t met him yet. One and all, they’re enormously hospitable in their farms – they’ll share with you everything they have. The kids – they’re a delight, shy and gentle and biddable. You’ve made a good move, mister, coming here, if the loneliness doesn’t kill you. Sometimes it gets me down, especially on a Sunday morning when I find myself preaching to half-a-dozen unmoved faces. They were very religious once, now they’re reverting to paganism as fast as they can. The minister is more or less a nonentity, a useless appendage. Changed days, my boy. We used to wield great power, we ministers. We were second only to the laird, and the schoolmaster got ten pounds a year. Your remote predecessor ate the scraps from my predecessor’s table. Changed days, right enough. Enjoy yourself, Bill. I know you will, for a year or two anyway.’

By this time the manse car had brought me home with my luggage, and we were seated at either side of a newly-lighted fire in the school-house parlour. Donald Barr went away to prepare his sermon. I picked a novel at random from the bookcase, and had read maybe a half-dozen pages when I had my first visitor, the girl with the abundant black hair and laughter-lighted face; the loved one; the slightly bewildered one; the looker into sunsets.

The pupils descended on the playground, and swirled round like a swarm of birds, just before nine o’clock next morning. There were twenty children in the island school, ranging in age from five to twelve. So, they had to be arranged in different sections in the single large class-room. The four youngest were learning to read from the new phonetic script. Half-a-dozen or so of the eldest pupils would be going after the summer holidays to the senior secondary school in Kirkwall; they were making a start on French and Geometry. In between, and simultaneously, the others worked away at history, geography, reading, drawing, sums. I found the variety a bit bewildering, that first day.

Still, I enjoyed it. Everything that the minister had said about the island children was true. The impudence and indifference that the city children offered you in exchange for your labours, the common currency of my previous class-rooms, these were absent here. Instead, they looked at me
and everything I did with a round-eyed wonderment. I expected that this would not last beyond the first weekend. Only once, in the middle of the afternoon, was there any kind of ruffling of the bright surface. With the six oldest ones I was going through a geometry theorem on the blackboard. A tall boy stood up. ‘Please sir,’ he said, ‘that’s not the way Miss McKillop taught us to do it.’

The class-room had been murmurous as a beehive. Now there was silence, as if a spell had been laid on the school.

‘Please, sir, on Thursday afternoons Miss McKillop gave us nature study.’ This from a ten-year old girl with hair like a bronze bell. She stood up and blurted it out, bravely and a little resentfully.

‘And what exactly did this nature study consist of?’ I said.

‘Please, sir,’ said a boy whose head was like a hayrick and whose face was a galaxy of freckles, ‘we would go to the beach for shells, and sometimes, please, sir, to the marsh for wild flowers.’

‘Miss McKillop took us all,’ said another boy. ‘Please, sir.’ Miss McKillop… Miss McKillop… Miss McKillop… The name scattered softly through the school as if a rose had shed its petals. Indeed last night’s fragrance seemed to be everywhere in the class-room. A dozen mouths uttered the name. They looked at me, but they looked at me as if somebody else was sitting at the high desk beside the blackboard.

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Nature study on Thursday afternoons. I don’t see anything against it, except that I’m a great duffer when it comes to flowers and birds and such-like. Still, I’m sure none of us will be any the worse of a stroll through the fields on a Thursday afternoon. But this Thursday, you see, I’m new here, I’m feeling my way, and I’m pretty ignorant of what should be, so I think for today we’d just better carry on the way we’re doing.

The spell was broken. The fragrance was withdrawn.

They returned to their phonetics and history and geometry. Their heads bent obediently once more over books and jotters. I lifted the pointer, and noticed that my fist was blue with cold. And the mouth of the boy who had first mentioned the name of Miss McKillop trembled, in the heart of that warm summer afternoon, as he gave me the proof of the theorem.

‘Thank God for that,’ said Donald Barr. He brought a chessboard and a box of chessmen from the cupboard. He blew a spurt of dust from them. ‘We’d have grown to hate each other after a fortnight, trying to warm each other up with politics and island gossip.’ He arranged the pieces on the board. ‘I’m very glad also that you’re only a middling player, same as me. We can spend our evenings in an amiable silence.’

We were very indifferent players indeed. None of our games took longer than an hour to play. No victory came about through strategy, skill, or foresight. All without exception that first evening were lost by some incredible blunder (followed by muted cursings and the despairing fall of a fist on the table).

‘You’re right,’ I said after the fourth game, ‘silence is the true test of friendship.’

We had won two games each. We decided to drink a jar of ale and smoke our pipes before playing the decider. Donald Barr made his own beer, a nutty potent brew that crept through your veins and overcame you after ten minutes or so with a drowsy contentment. We smoked and sipped mostly in silence; yet fine companionable thoughts moved through our minds and were occasionally uttered.
‘I am very please so far,’ I said after a time, ‘with this island and the people in it. The children are truly a delight. Mrs Sinclair who makes the school dinner has a nice touch with stew. There is also the young woman who visited me briefly last night. She was looking for somebody else, unfortunately. I hope she comes often.’

‘What young woman?’ said the minister drowsily.

‘She didn’t say her name,’ I said. ‘She’s uncommonly good looking, what the teenagers in my last school would call a rare chick.’

‘Describe this paragon,’ said Donald Barr.

I am no great shakes at describing things, especially beautiful young women. But I did my best, between puffs at my pipe. The mass of black hair. The wide hazel eyes. The red restless laughing mouth. ‘It was,’ I said, ‘as if she had come straight into the house out of a rose garden. She asked for Johnny.’

Something had happened to the Rev. Donald Barr. My words seemed to wash the drowsiness from his face; he was like a sleeper on summer hills overcome with rain. He sat up in his chair and looked at me. He was really agitated. He knocked the ember of tobacco out of his pipe. He took a deep gulp of ale from his mug. Then he walked to the window and looked out at the thickening light. The clock on the mantelshelf ticked on beyond eleven o’clock.

‘And so,’ I said, ‘may she come back often to the school-house, if it’s only to look for this Johnny.’

From Donald Barr, no answer. Silence is a test of friendship but I wanted very much to learn the name of my visitor; or rather I was seeking for a confirmation.

Donald Barr said, ‘A ghost is the soul of a dead person who is earth-bound. That is, it is much attached to the things of this world that it is unwilling to let go of them. It cannot believe it is dead.

It cannot accept for one moment that its body has been gathered back into the four elements. It refuses to set out on the only road it can take now, into the kingdom of the dead. No, it is in love too much with what it has been and known. It will not forgive the wrongs that were done to it while it was alive. It clings on desperately to love.’

‘I was not speaking about any ghost,’ I said. ‘I was trying to tell you about this very delightful lovely girl.’

‘If I was a priest,’ said Donald Barr, ‘instead of a minister, I might tell you that a ghost is a spirit lost between this world and purgatory. It refuses to shed its earthly appetites. It will not enter the dark gate of suffering.’

The northern twilight thickened in the room while we spoke. Our conversation was another kind of chess. Yet each knew what the other was about.

‘I hope she’s there tonight,’ I said. ‘I might even prevail on her to make me some toast and hot chocolate. For it seems I’m going to get no supper in the manse.’

‘You’re not scared?’ said Donald Barr from the window.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not frightened of that kind of ghost. It seemed to me, when we were speaking together in the school-house last night, this girl and I, that I was the wan lost one, the squeaker and gibberer, and she was a part of the ever-springing fountain.’

‘Go home then to your ghost,’ said Donald Barr. ‘We won’t play any more chess tonight. She won’t harm you, you’re quite right there.’
We stood together at the end of his garden path.

‘Miss McKillop,’ I murmured to the dark shape that was fumbling for the latch of the gate.

‘Sandra McKillop,’ said Donald, ‘died the twenty-third of May this year. I buried her on the third of June, herself and John Germiston, in separate graves.

‘Tell me,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Donald, ‘for I do not know the facts. Never ask me for a partial account. It seemed to me they were happy. I refuse to wrong the dead. Go in peace.’

There was no apparition in the school-house that night. I went to bed and slept soundly, drugged with fresh air, ale, fellowship; and a growing wonderment.

The days passed, and I did not see the ghost again. Occasionally I caught the fragrance, a drift of sudden sweetness in the long corridor between kitchen and parlour, or in the garden or on the pebbled path between the house and the school. Occasionally a stir of cold went through the parlour late at night as I sat reading, and no heaping of peats would warm the air again for half-hour or so. I would look up, eagerly I must confess, but nothing trembled into form and breathing out of the expectant air.

It was as if the ghost had grown shy and uncertain, indicated her presence only by hints and suggestions. And in the class-room too things quietened down, and the island pupils and I worked out our regime together as the summer days passed. Only occasionally a five-year-old would whisper something about Miss McKillop, and smile, and then look sad; and it was like a small scattering of rose-petals. Apart from that everything proceeded smoothly to the final closing of books at the end of the school year.

One man in the island I did not like, and that was Henrikson who kept the island store and garage, my neighbour. A low wall separated the school garden from Henrikson’s land, which was usually untidy with empty lemonade cases, oil drums, sodden cardboard boxes. Apart from the man’s simple presence, which he insisted on inflicting on me, I was put out by things in his character. For example, he showed an admiration for learning and university degrees that amounted to sycophancy; and this I could not abide, having sprung myself from a race of labourers and miners and railwaymen, good people all, more solid and sound and kindly than most university people, in my experience. But the drift of Henrikson’s talk was that farmers and such like, including himself, were poor creatures indeed compared to their peers who had educated themselves and got into the professions and so risen in the world. This was bad enough; but soon he began to direct arrows of slander at this person and that in the island. ‘Arrows’ is too open and forthright a word for it; it was more the work of ‘the smiler with the knife’. Such-and-such a farmer, he told me, was in financial difficulties, we wouldn’t be seeing him in Quoylay much longer. This other young fellow had run his motor-cycle for two years now without a licence; maybe somebody should do something about it; he himself had no objection to sending anonymous letters to the authorities in such a case. Did I see that half-ruined croft down at the shore? Two so-called respectable people in this island – he would mention no names – had spent a whole weekend together there at show time last summer, a married man and a farmer’s daughter. The straw they had lain on hadn’t even been cleaned out… This was the kind of talk that went on over the low wall between school and store on the late summer evenings. It was difficult to avoid the man; as soon as he saw me weeding the potato patch, or watering the pinks, out he came with his smirks and cap-touchings, and leaned confidentially over the wall. It is easy to say I could
simply have turned my back on him; but in many ways I am a coward; and even the basest of the living can coerce me to some extent. One evening his theme was the kirk and the minister. ‘I’m not wanting to criticise any friend of yours,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen him more than once in the schoolhouse and I’ve heard that you visit him in the manse, and it’s no business of mine, but that man is not a real minister, if you ask me. We’re used with a different kind of preaching in this island, and a different kind of pastoral behaviour too, I assure you of that. I know for a fact that he brews – he bought two tins of malt, and hops, from the store last month. The old ministers were one and all very much against drink. What’s a minister for if he doesn’t keep people’s feet on the true path, yes, if he doesn’t warn them and counsel them in season and out of season, you know, in regard to their conduct? The old ministers that were here formerly had a proper understanding of their office. But this Mr Barr, he closes his eyes to things that are a crying scandal to the whole island. For example –’

‘Mr Barr is a very good friend of mine,’ I said.

‘O, to be sure,’ he cried. ‘I know. He’s an educated man and so are you too, Mr Reynolds. I spoke out of place, I’m sorry. I’m just a simple countryman, brought up on the shorter catechism and the good book. Times are changing fast. I’m sure people who have been to the university have a different way of looking at things from an old country chap. No offence, Mr Reynolds, I hope.’

A few moths were out, clinging to the stones, fluttering and birring softly on the kitchen window. I turned and went in without saying goodnight to Mr Henrikson.

And as I went along the corridor, with a bad taste in my mouth from that holy old creep across the road, I heard it, a low reluctant weeping from above, from the bedroom. I ran upstairs and threw open the door. The room was empty, but it was as cold as the heart of an iceberg, and the unmistakable fragrance clung about the window curtains and the counterpane. There was the impression of a head on the pillow, as if someone had knelt beside the bed for half-hour to sort out her troubles in silence.

My ghost was being pierced by a slow wondering sadness.

Henrikson my neighbour was not a man to be put off by slights and reprovings. The very next evening I was fixing lures to my sillock rod in the garden, and there he was humped over the wall, obsequious and smiling.

It had been a fine day, hadn’t it? And now that the school was closed for the summer, would I not be thinking of going off to Edinburgh or Brighton or Majorca for a bit of a holiday? Well, that was fine, that I liked the island so much. To tell the truth, most of the folk in Quoylay were very glad to have a quiet respectable man like me in the school, after the wild goings-on that had been just before I arrived…

I was sick and tired of this man, and yet I knew that now I was to hear, in a very poisoned and biased version, the story of Sandra McKillop the school-mistress and Johnny. Donald Barr, out of compassion for the dead, would never have told me. So I threw my arms companionably over the wall and I offered Henrikson my tobacco pouch and I said, ‘What kind of goings-on would that be now, Mr Henrikson?’

Miss Sandra McKillop had come to the island school straight from the teachers’ training college in Scotland two years before. (I am paraphrasing Henrikson’s account, removing most
of the barbs, trying to imagine a rose here and there.) She was a great change from the previous
teacher, a finicky perjink old maid, and that for a start warmed the hearts of the islanders to her.
But it was in the school itself that she scored her great success; the children of all ages took to her
at once. She was a born teacher. Every day she held them in thrall from the first bell to the last.
And even after school there was a dancing cluster of them round her all the way to her front door.
The stupid ones and the ugly ones adored her especially, because she made them feel accepted.
She enriched their days.

She was a good-looking girl. (‘I won’t deny that,’ said Henrikson, ‘as bonny a young woman
as ever I saw.’) More than one of the island bachelors hung about the school gate from time to
time, hoping for a word with her. Nothing doing; she was pleasant and open with them and
with everybody, but love did not enter her scheme of things; at least, not yet. She was a sociable
girl, and was invited here and there among the farms for supper. She gave one or two talks to
the Rural Institute, about her holidays abroad and life in her training college. She went to church
every Sunday morning and sang in the choir, and afterwards taught in the Sunday school. But
mostly she stayed at home. New bright curtains appeared in all the windows. She was especially
fond of flowers; the little glass porch at the front of the house was full all the year round with
flowering plants; the school garden, that first summer after she came, was a delight. All the bees
in the island seemed to forage in those flowers.

How she first met John Germiston, nobody knows. It was almost certainly during one of
those long walks she took in the summer evenings of her second year. John Germiston kept a croft
on the side of the Ward Hill, a poor enough place with a couple of cows and a scatter of hens.
Three years before he had courted a girl from the neighbouring island of Hellya. He had sailed
across and got married in the kirk there and brought his bride home, a shy creature whose looks
changed as swiftly as the summer loch. And there in his croft he installed her. And she would
be seen from time to time feeding the hens at the end of the house, or hanging out washing, or
standing at the road-end with her basket waiting for the grocery van. But she never became part
of the community. With the coming of winter she was seen less and less – a wide-eyed face in the
window, a figure against the skyline looking over the sound towards Hellya. The doctor began to
call regularly once a week at the croft. John Germiston let it be known in the smithy that his wife
was not keeping well.

There is a trouble in the islands that is called morbus orcadensis.

It is a darkening of the mind, a progressive flawing and thickening of the clear lens of the
spirit. It is said to be induced in sensitive people by the long black overhang of winter; the howl
and sob of the wind over the moors that goes on sometimes for days on end; the perpetual rain
that makes of tilth and pasture one indiscriminate bog; the unending gnaw of the sea at the crags.

Soon after the new year they took the stricken girl to a hospital in the south.

Of course everyone in Quoylay was sorry for John Germiston. It is a hard thing for a young
handsome man to work a croft by himself. And yet these things happen from time to time.
There are a few cheerful old men in the folds of the hills, or down by the shore, who have been
widowers since their twenties.

Somewhere on the hill, one evening in spring, John Germiston met Sandra McKillop. They
spoke together. He brought her to his house. She stood in the door and saw the desolation inside;
the rusted pot, the torn curtains, the filthy hearth. The worm had bored deep into that rose.

From that first meeting everything proceeded swiftly and inevitably. No sooner was school
over for the day than Miss McKillop shook the adoring children off and was away to the croft of Stanebreck on the hill with a basket of bannocks or a bundle of clean washing. She stayed late into the evening. Sometimes they would be seen wandering together along the edge of the crags, while far below the Atlantic fell unquietly among shelving rocks and hollow caves; on and on they walked into the sunset, while near and far the crofts watched and speculated.

Night after night, late, as April brightened into May, she would come home alone. A light would go on in the school-house kitchen. She would stand in the garden for a while among her hosts of blossoms. Then she would go in and lock the door. Her bedroom window was briefly illuminated. Then the whole house was dark.

‘I suppose,’ said Henrikson, ‘nobody could have said a thing if it had stopped there. There was suspicion – well, what do you expect, a young woman visiting a married man night after night, and her a school-teacher with a position to keep up – but I don’t suppose anybody could have done a thing about it.

‘But in the end the two of them got bold. They got careless. It wasn’t enough for this hussy to visit her fancy-man in his croft – O no, the bold boy takes to sallying down two or three times a week to the school-house for his supper, if you please.

‘Still nobody could make a move. A person is entitled to invite another person to the house for supper, even though on one occasion at least they don’t draw the curtain and I can see from my kitchen their hands folded together in the middle of the table and all that laughter going on between them.

‘Mr Reynolds, I considered it my duty to watch, yes, and to report to the proper quarters if necessary.

‘One Friday evening Germiston arrives at the school-house at nine o’clock. A fine evening at the beginning of May it was. The light went on in the parlour. The curtain was drawn. After an hour or so the light goes on in her bedroom. “Ah ha”, say I to myself, “I’ve missed their farewells tonight, I’ve missed all the kissing in the door.” …But I was wrong, Mr Reynolds. Something far worse was happening. At half past five in the morning I got up to stock the van, and I saw him going home over the hill, black against the rising sun. At half past five in the morning.

‘That same day, being an elder, I went to the manse. Mr Barr refused to do a thing about it. “Miss McKillop is a member of my church. If she’s in trouble of any sort she’ll come to me,” he said. “I will not act on slanderous rumours. There’s more than one crofter on the hill at half past five in the morning.” …There’s your modern ministers for you. And I don’t care if he is your friend, Mr Reynolds, I must speak my mind about this business.

‘By now the whole island was a hive of rumour.

‘Neither John Germiston nor Miss McKillop could stir without some eye being on them and some tongue speculating. And yet they went on meeting one another, quite open and shameless, as if they were the only living people in an island of ghosts. They would wander along the loch shore together, hand in hand, sometimes stopping to watch the swans or the eiders, not caring at all that a dozen croft windows were watching their lingerings and kissings. Then, arm about one another, they would turn across the fields in the direction of the school-house.

‘Ay, but the dog of Stanebreck was a lonely dog till the sun got up, all that month of May.

‘One Tuesday morning she arrived late for school, at a quarter past nine. She arrived with the mud of the hill plastered over her stockings, and half-dead with sleep. “Hurrah”, cried the bairns
congregated round the locked door of the school. They knew no better, the poor innocent things. They shouted half with delight and half with disappointment when she gave them the morning off, told them to come back in the afternoon. They were not to know what manner of thing had made their teacher so exhausted.

‘Of course it was no longer possible to have a woman like her for the island teacher.

‘I had written to this person and that. Enquiries were under way, discreetly, you know, so as not to cause any undue sensation. I think in the end pressure would have been put on her to resign. But as things turned out it wasn’t necessary.

‘One night they both disappeared. They vanished as if they had been swept clean off the face of the island. The school door remained locked all the next week. John Germiston’s unmilked cow bellowed in its steep field. “Ah ha,” said the men in the smithy, “so it’s come to this, they’ve run away together…”

‘Ten days later a fishing boat drew up the two bodies a mile west of Hellya. Their arms were round each other. The fishermen had trouble separating the yellow hair from the black hair.

Henrikson was having difficulty with his breathing; his voice dropped and quavered and choked so that I could hardly hear his last three words. ‘They were naked,’ he mouthed venomously.

Moths flickered between us. The sea boomed and hushed from the far side of the hill. In a nearby croft a light came on.

‘And so,’ said Henrikson, ‘we decided that we didn’t want a woman teacher after that. That’s why you’re here, Mr Reynolds.’

We drifted apart, Henrikson and I, to our separate doors. Eagerly that night I wished for the vanished passion to fill my rooms: the ghost, the chill, the scent of roses. But in the school-house was only a most terrible desolation.

On fine evenings that summer, when tide and light were suitable, Donald Barr and I would fish for sillocks and cuithes from the long sloping skerry under the crag. Or we would ask the loan of a crofter’s boat, if the fish were scanty there, and row out with our lines into the bay.

The evening before the agricultural show was bright and calm. We waited in the bay with dripping oars for the sun to set behind the hill. We put our rods deep into the dazzle but not one cuithie responded. Presently the sun furled itself in a cloud, and it was as if a rose had burst open over the sea’s unflawed mirror. Cuithie fishing is a sport that requires little skill. Time after time we hauled our rods in burgeoning with strenuous sea fruit, until the bottom of the dinghy was a floor of unquiet gulping silver. Then the dense undersea hordes moved away, and for twenty minutes, while the rose of sunset faded and the long bay gloomed, we caught nothing.

‘It must have been about here,’ I said to Donald Barr, ‘that they were drowned.’

He said nothing. He had never discussed the affair with me, beyond that one mention of the girl’s name at the manse gate. A chill moved in from the west; breaths of night air flawed the dark sea mirror.

‘The earth bound soul refuses to acknowledge its death,’ said Donald. ‘It is desperately in love with the things of this world - possessions, fame, lust. How, once it has tasted them, can it ever exist without them? Death is a negation of all that wonder and delight. It will not enter the dark door of the grave. It lurks, a ghost, round the places where it fed on earthly joys. It spreads a coldness about the abodes of the living. The five senses pulse through it, but fadingly, because
there is nothing for the appetite to feed on, only memories and shadows. Sooner or later the soul must enter the dark door. But no – it will not - for a year or for a decade or for a century it lingers about the place of its passion, a rose garden or a turret or a cross-roads. It will not acknowledge that all this loveliness of sea and sky and islands, and all the rare things that happen among them, are merely shadows of a greater reality. At last the starved soul is forced to accept it, for it finds itself utterly alone, surrounded as time goes by with strange new unloved objects and withered faces and skulls. Reluctantly it stoops under the dark lintel. All loves are forgotten then. It sets out on the quest for Love itself. For this it was created in the beginning.

We hauled the dingy high up the beach and secured her to a rock. A few mild summer stars glimmered. The sea was dark in the bay, under the shadow of the cliff, but the Atlantic horizon was still flushed a little with reluctant sunset, and all between was a vast slow heave of gray.

‘I have a bottle of very good malt whisky in the school-house,’ I said. ‘I think a man could taste worse things after a long evening on the sea.’

It was then that I heard the harp-like shivering cries far out in the bay. The sea thins out the human voice, purges it of its earthiness, lends it a purity and poignancy.

‘Wait for me,’ cried the girl’s voice. ‘Where are you? You’re swimming too fast.’

Donald Barr had heard the voices also. Night folded us increasingly in gloom and cold as we stood motionless under the sea-bank. He passed me his tobacco pouch. I struck a match. The flame trembled between us.

‘This way,’ shouted a firm strong happy voice (but attenuated on the harpstrings of the sea). I’m over here.

The still bay shivered from end to end with a single glad cry. Then there was silence.

The minister and I turned. We climbed over loose stones and sandy hillocks to the road. We lashed our heavy basket of cuithes into the boot of Donald Barr’s old Ford. Then we got in, one on each side, and he pressed the starter.

‘Earth-bound souls enact their little dramas over and over again, but each time a little more weakly,’ he said. ‘The reality of death covers them increasingly with its good oblivion. You will be haunted for a month or two yet. But at last the roses will lose their scent.’

The car stopped in front of the dark school-house.

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